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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 004715

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SUBJECT: DPP SPOKESMAN: DPP STILL HAS PUBLIC SUPPORT, BACK ON THE OFFENSIVE

REF: TAIPEI 4646

Classified By: DIR Douglas H. Paal, Reason 1.4(D)

11. (SBU) AIT's Public Affairs Section (PAS) is looking at media strategies and public platforms of Taiwan's main political parties in the run-up to the December 3 elections. This is the second in a series and follows an earlier report on a meeting with the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) spokeswoman (see Ref A). During a November 22 meeting with AIT at Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) headquarters, DPP Spokesman Cheng Wen-tsang described the impact of the scandals on DPP ratings, election strategy, media bias, and arms procurement. Cheng explained that the DPP is taking a counteroffensive strategy against the KMT, but he did not provide an election forecast. He also expressed his hope for progress on the arms procurement issue once the elections end.

Scandals Hurting DPP Ratings

12. (SBU) Cheng attributed the DPP's declining approval ratings to the recent scandals involving former Presidential Office Deputy Secretary-General Chen Che-nan and the Kaohsiung Rapid Transit Corp (KRTC), but said he does not believe the public sees the DPP as a party of "black gold." He suggested that the KMT has overplayed these scandals, and this will eventually backfire on the opposition because the public understands that Chen Che-nan does not equal the DPP.

DPP Strikes Back

13. (SBU) Cheng explained that the DPP began a counteroffensive strategy starting last week. They are now examining records of opposition candidates and exposing past misdeeds. These efforts have led to a "U-turn" in DPP approval ratings. One example he noted was the KMT's Taipei County candidate Chou Hsi-wei. While he was a Taiwan Provincial Council member, Chou had pressured banks to extend him substantial loans. As a result of this exposure, the race in Taipei County is getting tighter. Cheng provided a second example of Taichung Mayor Jason Hu. Cheng stated that Hu received excess pension payments from the government when he retired from the Taiwan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) because he had counted his time spent as a KMT official in calculating his length of government employment.

14. (SBU) Cheng asserted that the DPP still commands strong support in Taipei and Ilan Counties. He declined to forecast results for individual races with the exception of Yunlin County, which he believes the DPP will win, and said that he sees most races as "seesaw battles."

Significance of Elections

15. (SBU) Cheng described the DPP's election platform as consisting of three themes: reform, anti-corruption (both within the DPP and in the opposition), and "cherish Taiwan." Cheng acknowledged that the DPP's performance over the past five years has not been up to par, but he believes things are now moving in the right direction and the public recognizes these positive developments. Cheng stated that, although these are local elections, they are important because the heads of Taiwan's counties and cities will serve as the "main support" for presidential candidates in 2008.

16. (SBU) According to Cheng, these elections are also important because: a) This is the first election for Ma Ying-jeou as KMT Party Chairman, so this is a good chance to gauge his leadership; b) The DPP has several potential candidates to succeed President Chen Shui-bian in 2008, so this is a good indicator of the party's leadership pool; c) A victory by the opposition will send the wrong message to China since many KMT and PFP politicians have shown their pro-China stance by visiting China, blocking arms procurement, and welcoming "Chinese Communists" to Taiwan.

Optimistic About Arms Procurement

17. (SBU) Cheng said he is hopeful that once the political storm settles after the election, the DPP, KMT, and PFP will be able to sit down and discuss the arms procurement issue in

a "rational" manner. He believes that there can be progress on this issue since the DPP has made some compromises, such as the agreement to include PAC-III missiles in the regular annual budget rather than in a single special budget. He also feels that public support for arms procurement is growing. Cheng emphasized that the DPP would like to procure arms not for use against China, but in order to talk to China on equal terms.

18. (SBU) Cheng claimed that after then-KMT Chairman Lien Chan lost the 2004 presidential election, he changed his stance from pro-U.S. to pro-China. In the process, he also converted many KMT legislators in the same direction, adding impetus to the anti-arms procurement group. However, Cheng stressed that this is not a Blue versus Green issue, since there are people within the KMT and PFP who support arms procurement.

"The Media Is Against Us"

19. (SBU) Cheng asserted that it is a "known fact" that the Taiwan media is unfriendly towards the DPP, and this "fact" is also clear to the public. Regarding the TVBS issue, the DPP leadership has reiterated the party policy of respect for freedom of speech, even though TVBS's criticism of the DPP was "unfair." The DPP is now trying to mend relations with the media because the party supports democracy, Cheng stressed.

10. (SBU) Cheng described the political leanings of the various media outlets in the following manner. The pro-Blue TV stations are CTI, TVBS, ERA, and the pro-Green stations are Formosa TV and Sanlih. ETTV's political stance depends on the situation. In terms of newspapers, China Times and United Daily News are pro-Blue, and Liberty Times is pro-Green. Cheng concluded that the pan-Green is thus in an inferior position, since the majority of the media supports the pan-Blue.

Bio Note: Cheng a Grassroots Activist At Heart

11. (C) Cheng began his career as a grassroots activist and is still in that mold. He was leader of the student union at Taiwan University, and in 1990, he became leader of the student political movement "Formosa Lily", which demanded political reform. He joined the DPP in 1991 and has risen through the ranks, mostly in public relations positions.

Comment

12. (C) Cheng's comments offer a familiar picture, reviewing themes that the DPP has deployed in the press over the last few weeks. He paints the DPP as the underdog, mentioning several times that the media is against them but that the party still enjoys wide popular support. In some cases, such as the Taichung Mayor Hu's pension issue, Cheng is clearly providing only a part of the story. Not surprisingly, this may be better campaign rhetoric than it is policy.

Paal